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Governing the Other: Exploring the Discourse of Democracy in a Multiverse of Reason

AGUSTIN MARTIN RODRIGUEZ

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2009, 234 p.

Like other developing democracies in the Global South, the current state of electoral democracy in post-1986 Philippines is not an exception: it is mired in deep contradictions, insurmountable challenges, and long-standing instabilities. The view that Philippine electoral democracy is a brilliant achievement by itself for the Filipino people is an utter misnomer: This means that it is profoundly characterized by an unfortunate praxis of rigged electoral processes, a highly elitist capitalist society, a regrettably rotten bureaucracy, a pervasive national sense of cynicism towards matters pertaining to the country's *res publica*, and a cadre of politicians whose *amour de soi* overshadows the much-needed sense of public interest which is necessary for serving their respective constituencies. What is even more disturbing is that the return of electoral and liberal constitutional democracy in 1986 after two decades of the bloody crony authoritarianism of Ferdinand Marcos appears to have done nothing to rectify the extensive socio-economic inequities across the country, for which colonial history has much to be blamed: the Gini coefficient in 1985 or before the revolution was pegged at around 0.45, and this value has unsurprisingly remained until 2003, for which the current data (*Poverty in the Philippines: Income, Assets, and Access*, 2005) are available. At the ideational-discursive level, even the exercise of defining, operationalizing, and imagining what *democracy* means for the country, both in conceptual and praxeological terms, is a bitterly contested process; to a large extent, thinking about democracy stops at the level of electoral process, which merely functions as a cloak of legitimacy for elites to unjustly govern over their less fortunate, marginalized Others.

In this regard, *Governing the Other* aims to problematize the notion of "just governance" in the context of a country beset by a "multiplicity of communities with competing conceptions of the good" (p. 1). Agustin Rodriguez commences by positing the obvious: specifically, that Filipinos "are an anarchic people who are concerned merely with the individual, familial, and community needs" (p. 2). In other words, the central point of inquiry here is why Filipinos are *ungovernable*. The author argues that, contrary to *prima facie* understanding, the "fact" of Filipinos' "*ungovernability*" is *not* a clear manifestation of a "flawed national character"; it is, instead, attributable to how the Philippine nation-state remains "unjustified" to the citizenry. As such, Rodriguez focuses on the Filipino poor as the unit of analyses, referred in the book as the *Other*, thereby proffering a theoretical argument which traces the mode of "*ungovernability*" to the fundamental difference between the defining rationality that underlies the current governance structures, on the one hand, and the *Others'* alienated perspective, brought by their starkly contrastive life-world, on the other hand. By this problematique, the author proposes a solution for bridging this sharply defined divide

between the dominant rationality and the rationality of the *Others*: in particular, he calls for the establishment of a “discursive democracy” that, he hopes, will promote solidarity-building across the society by strengthening political participation and empowerment. Drawing largely on Jürgen Habermas’ concept of deliberative democracy, Rodriguez advocates that the last frontier of hope lies in reinvigorating local governance structures that encourage inclusive and vigilant political participation and active citizenship within a given constituency. In other words, reform towards a truly discursive politics in the Philippines, so to speak, can be achieved by buttressing the modalities of power in grassroots-based and inclusive participation by all relevant constituents.

Taking all these into account, *Governing the Other* is commendable for its noble aim of using the philosophical mode of analysis to analyze concrete praxeological and political problems of the developing world, particularly in the Philippines. But the book has some fundamental shortcomings. Particularly, the grave problem lies in its methodology. It claims that it employs the philosophical mode of analysis in order to address a concrete problem. Written as a philosophical reflection of concrete praxeological problems in the Philippines, *Governing the Other*,¹⁾ in my view, has an obvious shortcoming of relying too much on Habermas’ universalistic views on deliberative democracy, without providing a compelling argumentation of how the author’s “discursive democracy” will do the magic of bringing Philippine politics in its rightful place. To illustrate this, overreliance on “discursive/deliberative politics” amidst the systemic negligence of more pressing issues of systemic material socio-economic inequities can be truly disenfranchising for the masses, in fact, a step backward from the emancipatory goals of the kind of democratic politics that critical theory actually stands for. As such, it was only very recently that Jürgen Habermas acknowledged how the European integration project has failed with these words: “The European project can no longer continue in elite modus” (Diez 2011). In the same breath, an unjust Philippine political economy, already beset with deep material inequalities, is unlikely to undergo any transformation if married to an ever more disenfranchising mode of politics fueled by an unquestioned faith in the “deliberative mode”—a mode in which, more often than not, only the Filipino elites and the middle-class have the luxury of engaging.

More importantly, an apparent mismatch exists between the grave problem of Filipinos being “ungovernable” vis-à-vis the proposal of establishing “discursive democracy” in the country. There are two key problems here. First, from the vantage point of totality, the problem of governability must be understood on a much larger analytical scale. This means that the institutional shortcomings of contemporary socio-political infrastructures of policy-making in the Philippines are just

1) This reminds me of Bertrand Russell’s assertion against Karl Marx as a “philosopher”: “Considered purely as a philosopher, Marx has grave shortcomings. He is too practical, too much wrapped up in the problems of his time. His purview is confined to this planet, and, within this planet, to Man” (Russell 1995, 753).

symptomatic of the deeper problems endemic in the historically embedded governmental and social *structures* of injustice and disenfranchisement, as well as the political *agential* powers exerted by elites across the Philippine society. It is primarily through the lens of colonial and post-colonial history and the dominating material interests of the elites that one may see how discourse and deliberation alone can hardly address the lack of legitimacy of the state amongst the majority of the population, most particularly the poor. Second, given the strong inertia among the Filipino elites and the highly unequal class structures in the country that militate against radical reform, it is highly unlikely that a naïve reliance on *discursive*, or shall I say *deliberative democracy*, will bring about the eschatological salvation of a terminally ill democratic regime such as that in the Philippines. To push the argument further, I shall insist that post-1986 Philippine democracy is one of the most advanced deliberative democracies relative to other developing democracies in the Global South, with its highly diverse party-list system, an extremely vigilant and extensive grassroots-based civil society, and a very critical national and local media that is watchful and deliberative of issues that concern public interest. A more interesting line of inquiry, which Rodriguez should have addressed more in this work, is to what extent all of these apparent manifestations of deliberative democracy in the country are instrumentally being used to further elite interests—albeit in the Gramscian sense of cultural hegemony.

Finally, notwithstanding that the aims set forth in *Governing the Other* are modest, and that the philosophical reflections upon concrete Philippine political praxeological problems are quite illuminating, it appears that Rodriguez failed to realize that democracy is a *meta-regime*—it is an openly contested concept that entails transgressing the boundaries for critical and radical imagination in order to bring out a truly emancipatory politics. Unfortunately, a demand for more “discursive democracy” in the Philippines does not unleash the full emancipatory potential of democratic politics; instead, it may only serve to legitimize the even more pervasive entrenchment processes of elite domination—this, apparently, is the elephant in the room that no one is willing to recognize. Should the Filipino *intelligentsia* continue to focus on formalities such as deliberation at the expense of more substantive issues of extreme socio-economic inequities as the most important variable in the democratic politics of contestation, the disheveled Philippine state will remain illegitimate in the eyes of the majority.

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Reading Bangkok

ROSS KING

Singapore: NUS Press, 2011, 272 p.

Two long-standing issues in modern Thai history lie at the heart of *Reading Bangkok*: the country's independence and authoritarianism. "Was Thailand really independent?" is a question that has engaged numerous historians, as has why the country has struggled to attain democracy since the 1932 coup that ended the absolute monarchy. Architectural scholar Ross King uses these questions as a point of departure to unravel the contested cultural meanings of the built landscape of Bangkok, the capital city.

King uses the concept of "screens," which are ways in which colonization (of and by Thailand) and authoritarianism (rationalized by the state ideology, Nation, King, and Religion) are hidden and legitimized. The screens are placed over reality so that we see what Thai elites want us to see: Thailand's modernity, a policy that the Chakri kings had adopted since the nineteenth century. Screens distinguish between appearance and reality, but also create a suspicion that nothing in Bangkok is ever what it seems. The ontological blurring of the city is a result of King's method.

King does not think that Thailand was independent except in the limited political sense. But he complicates the issue by arguing that, while the country had been colonized by Western, Chinese and Indian capital, the Chakri kings had also colonized territories on the periphery of old Siam and adjacent to it. There is also a "reverse colonization" at work, where rural Thais brought to Bangkok to construct public works settled down in the city before participating in recent mass protests against the establishment. King's response to the second question is more straightforward. Thailand, he notes, remains in the grip of state ideology, although there are signs that its hidden status and hold are weakening due to the advent of new media and the centrifugal effects of globalization.

With these premises, King proceeds to deconstruct the built spaces of Bangkok, some historical, some well-known to outsiders, others less so, but all interesting. *Reading Bangkok* is divided into five chapters, which move spatially from the political center (Thonburi, the early capital founded in 1767 by King Taksin) to the intellectual periphery (the universities). In each chapter, King peels away screens to reveal what he calls "levels of colonization," showing a disjuncture between form and history, the diminishing of traditional life, the homogenizing work of state policies, and the impact of international capital.

In the first chapter, "Landscapes of Illusion," King unpacks the historic places of Thonburi,